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THE IRON CROSS

AT DAWN ON JUNE 22nd. 1941, THE GERMAN REICH INVADED RUSSIA. FROM PETSAMO TO THE BLACK SEA, CRACK UNITS OF THE WEHRMACHT ROLLED FORWARD.



DESPITE THE SCORCHED EARTH RESISTANCE OF THE SOVIETS, BY THE END OF THAT AUGUST, SMOLENSK HAD FALLEN, AND LENINGRAD WAS THREATENED. THE ONSLAUGHT OF THE NAZI WAR MACHINE REMAINED UNCHECKED, UNTIL AT LAST IT STOOD AT THE BLOOD-STAINED OUTSKIRTS OF STALINGRAD ITSELF.

Chapter 1. *The White Hell*

STANDING AS IT DID, ON THE BANKS OF THE MIGHTY VOLGA RIVER, STALINGRAD WAS THE KEY POSITION TO THE ENTIRE FRONT. TIME AND AGAIN THE GERMANS HURLED THEIR ARMoured REGIMENTS INTO THE ATTACK, ONLY TO BE DRIVEN BACK BY THE SHEER TENACITY OF THE DEFENDERS.

HOLD FAST, COMRADES! LET THE DOGS TASTE OUR RUSSIAN STEEL.



THE GREAT GERMAN OFFENSIVE HAD FALTERED. LINES OF COMMUNICATION WERE STRAINED TO BREAKING POINT, AND NOW THE DEADLY COLD OF THE RUSSIAN WINTER WAS MOVING SOUTH FROM THE NAKED WASTES OF SIBERIA.

I DO NOT LIKE IT, FELDWEBEL! FOR WEEKS WE HAVE HAMMERED THEM DAY AND NIGHT, AND YET THEY HOLD OUT. NOW THE SNOW HAS COME. I DO NOT LIKE IT!

JA, HERR HAUPTMANN. WE ARE NOT EQUIPPED FOR A WINTER CAMPAIGN. THERE ARE UGLY RUMOURS OF MASSIVE RUSSIAN TROOP MOVEMENTS.



HAUPTMANN FREIDRICH VON BRAUN, COMMANDER OF THE SEVENTH SQUADRON, PANZER GRENADIERS, WAS A WORRIED MAN.

DESPITE HIS BRIEF TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF LIFE, THE CAPTAIN WAS ALREADY A DISTINGUISHED OFFICER. BORN OF AN OLD PRUSSIAN FAMILY, HE HAD EARNED THE IRON CROSS THAT WAS PINNED TO HIS FIELD GREY TUNIC.

THE
OBERSTLEUTNANT
REQUIRES YOU AT
ONCE AT H.Q.,
SIR.

VERY WELL!
FELDWEBEL, CHECK
THE GUARDS. I'LL BE
BACK AS SOON AS
POSSIBLE.

JAWÖHL
HERR
HAUPTMANN!



COMPARED WITH THE SUB-ZERO TEMPERATURE OUTSIDE, THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE H.Q. HUT SEEM SUBTROPICAL. BUT THERE WAS NO WARMTH ON THE HARD FACE OF THE REGIMENTAL COMMANDER.

YOU
SENT FOR ME,
SIR?

JA, FRITZ! THE SITUATION
IS GRAVE. OUR INTELLIGENCE
REPORTS SHOW THE RUSSIANS
ARE PLANNING A PINCHER
MOVEMENT TO CUT THE
RAILWAY LINE, AT
OUR REAR.





AN HOUR LATER, THE PANZERS HAD GROPED THEIR WAY TO THEIR ALLOTTED SECTOR OF THE FRONT, THE CLATTER OF THEIR STEEL TRACKS STRANGELY MUFFLED IN THE EVER DEEPENING SNOW.



The Iron Cross

BUT THEY RECEIVED AN UNEXPECTED GREETING.



IT WAS AS THE MAJOR HAD SAID. AT 18.00 HOURS THE RUSSIANS HAD LAUNCHED THEIR COUNTER ATTACK. THE VAUNTED GERMAN ARMY, WITH ALL THEIR SUPERIOR EQUIPMENT WAS TRAPPED BY THE SAME DEADLY FOE THAT HAD TURNED NAPOLEON'S MEN FROM THE GATES OF MOSCOW. COSSACK CAVALRY HAD APPEARED LIKE DEMONS RIDING FROM A WHITE HELL, POURING DOWN ON TO THE GERMAN LINES.



HAG-RIDDEN WITH FEAR, THE MAJOR AND HIS DISPIRITED MEN PRESSED ON IN THEIR HEADLONG FLIGHT. BUT HAUPTMANN VON BRAUN HAD NEVER LEARNED THE WORD RETREAT.

BATTLE
FORMATION!
LOAD H.E.
PREPARE TO
ATTACK.

FOOLS!
YOU ARE
GOING TO YOUR
DEATHS!

THE CAPTAIN'S ORDERS HAD BEEN EXPLICIT — AT ALL COSTS! HALF A MILE ON, THEY MET THE RUSSIAN CHARGE IN A HEAD-ON COLLISION.

INDEPENDENT
GUN CONTROL! EVERY
MAN FOR HIMSELF.
KEEP FIRING!

WITHIN MINUTES OF THE ENGAGEMENT COMMENCING, CAPTAIN BRAUN HAD LOST ALL CONTROL OF HIS SQUADRON. BLINDED BY THE SNOW, THE GERMAN GUNNERS BLAZED WILDLY AT THE REARING, PLUNGING CAVALRY.

HAUPTMANN! HAUPTMANN,
I CANNOT SEE! THEY ARE
ALL ROUND US.

WE ARE HIT!
THE TRACKS ARE
SMASHED!

ABANDON
TANK! OUT,
MEN, AND
FIGHT FOR YOUR
LIVES!

GERMAN AND RUSSIAN ALIKE, DIED IN THE CONFUSION, THEIR CRIES DROWNED BY THE HOWLING ELEMENTS AROUND THEM.

HERR
HAUPTMANN
— LOOK OUT!
BEHIND YOU!

THE QUICK BURST FROM THE SCHMEISSER CUT SHORT THE LETHAL CHARGE, BUT THE STRICKEN ANIMAL FELL, PINNING THE CAPTAIN TO THE SIDE OF HIS ABANDONED TANK.



AND PRIVATE RUDI SCHUMACHER GAVE HIS LIFE FOR THE OFFICER HE HAD FOLLOWED FAITHFULLY FOR SO LONG.

ONE BY ONE THE TANKS FELL SILENT. THEY HAD REAPED A TERRIBLE HARVEST OF DEATH, BUT NOTHING COULD CHECK THAT STEAMROLLER ADVANCE. SLOWLY THE FIRING DIED AWAY SOUTHWARD, LEAVING ONLY THE SNOW TO LAY A GENTLE SHROUD.



IRONICALLY, IT WAS THE HEAPED SNOW, AND THE DEAD HORSE, THAT SAVED THE CAPTAIN'S LIFE. BETWEEN THEM, THEY SHIELDED HIS BODY FROM THE ICY WIND THAT WOULD HAVE MEANT CERTAIN DEATH. IT WAS DAYLIGHT WHEN HE REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS.

HERMAN!
RUDI! SCHMIDT!
IS ANYBODY
HERE? CAN
YOU HEAR
ME?



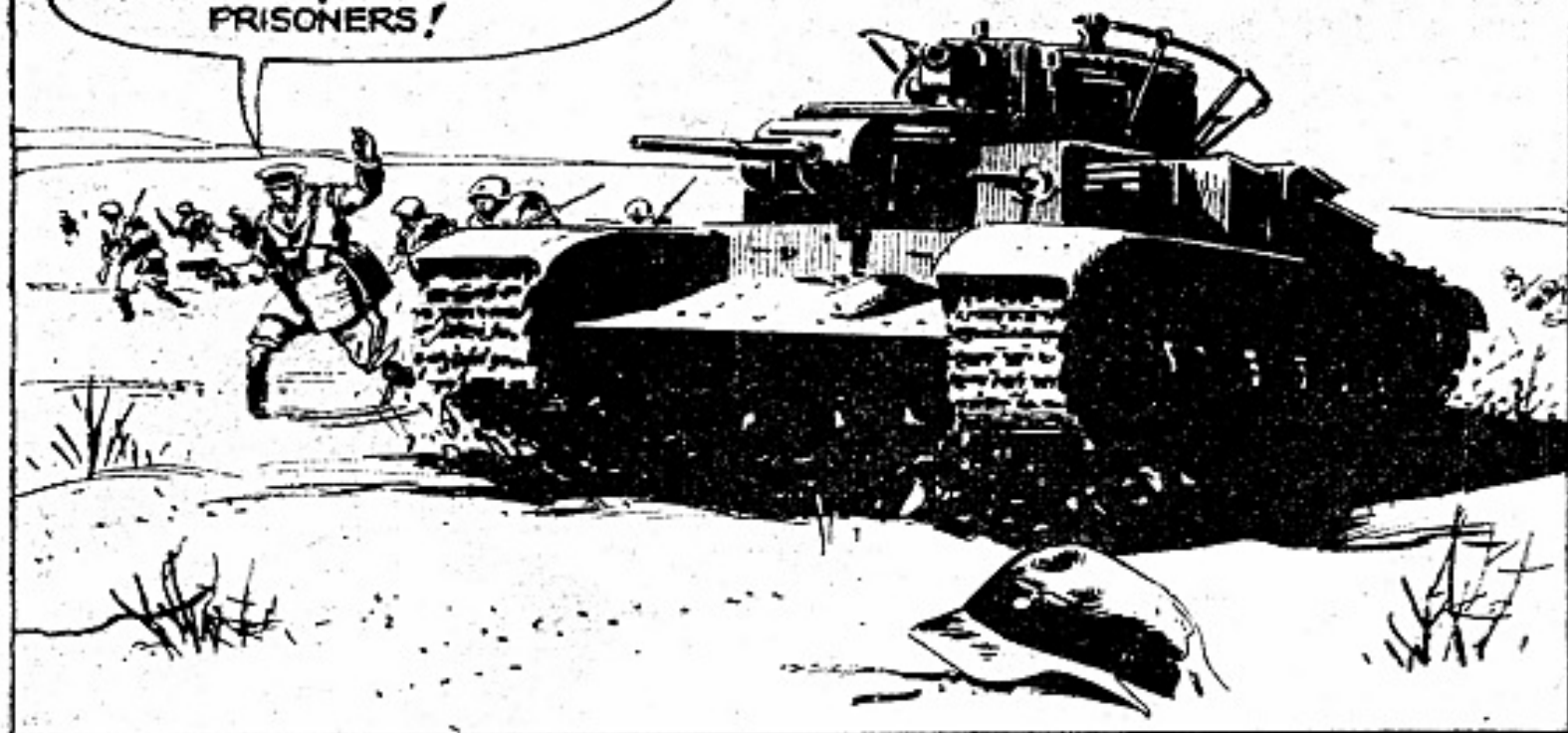
HIS VOICE TRAILED OFF, LOST IN THE VAST WHITE SILENCE AROUND HIM. SLOWLY THE TRUTH THAWED INTO HIS NUMBED BRAIN. THE SEVENTH SQUADRON PANZER GRENADIERS HAD CEASED TO EXIST. HE WAS THE SOLE SURVIVOR.

THEY TRUSTED
ME. FOLLOWED ME
— AND NOW THEY
ARE DEAD. WHY
DID I HAVE TO
LIVE? WHY
ME?



HISTORY HAS ALREADY RECORDED THE FATE THAT BEFELL THE GERMAN ARMY TRAPPED AROUND STALINGRAD. BY A GIGANTIC MILITARY BLUNDER, THEY WERE CUT OFF FROM ANY HOPE OF RETREAT, AND THE RUSSIAN HORDES EXACTED A TERRIBLE REVENGE.

REVENGE OUR
DEAD COMRADES! FORWARD
AND KILL! TAKE NO
PRISONERS!



OF THE 330,000 MEN OF THAT GERMAN ARMY, ONLY A PATHETIC HANDFUL ESCAPED TO JOIN THE LONG DESPERATE STRUGGLE BACK TO THEIR FATHERLAND. ONE OF THEM WAS HAUPTMANN VON BRAUN.



FAR AWAY FROM THOSE FROZEN WASTES, IN BERCHTESGADEN, ANOTHER VOICE ASKED THE SAME QUESTION. THE SCREAMING VOICE OF A FANATIC.

IDIOTS! DOLTS! OUR GLORIOUS ARMIES ARE PERISHING ON RUSSIAN SOIL, AND YOU STAND THERE SLOBBERING. FIND THE MEN WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS! FIND THE DOGS WHO HAVE BLUNDERED!

WE WILL EXORCISE THE ARMY OF THESE TRAITORS, MEIN FUEHRER. HEIL HITLER!



ONLY THE STRONGEST SURVIVED THE DREADFUL ORDEAL OF THAT NIGHTMARE RETREAT, BUT THEY WERE NOT GREETED WITH A HERO'S WELCOME. THEY FACED A WITCH HUNT BY THE GESTAPO AND S.S. GUARDS.

YOUR NAME, RANK AND UNIT? QUICK, MAN, ANSWER UP!

FREIDRICH VON BRAUN, PANZER GRENADIERS. BUT WHAT INFAMOUS TREATMENT IS THIS? WE ARE NOT PRISONERS! DO YOU KNOW WHAT SORT OF HELL WE HAVE COME FROM?

WATCH YOUR TONGUE, HERR HAUPTMANN. TIMES HAVE CHANGED WHILE YOU HAVE BEEN AWAY.



THERE WAS A SINISTER UNDERTONE TO THE GESTAPO OFFICER'S VOICE.

YOU WILL BE HELD, PENDING FURTHER ENQUIRIES. IT IS SUGGESTED THAT YOUR UNIT WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TO BREAK.

WHAT? YOU DARE TO SAY THAT? WAIT UNTIL GENERAL KLINGER HEARS OF THIS, YOU INSOLENT SWINE.



UNFORTUNATELY GENERAL KLINGER MET WITH AN-ER-ACCIDENT! HE IS DEAD!

IT WAS TWO DAYS BEFORE CAPTAIN BRAUN AGAIN FACED HIS INQUISITORS. TWO DAYS, IN WHICH TO DISCOVER THE ARMY WAS NO LONGER RUN BY THE PROFESSIONAL SOLDIERS HE KNEW AND UNDERSTOOD.

YOU HAVE A GOOD RECORD, BRAUN. DISTINGUISHED SERVICE WITH THE ARMY, BUT WE SEE YOUR GRANDMOTHER WAS ENGLISH! YOU SPEAK ENGLISH WELL, CAPTAIN? YOU SPENT SOME TIME IN ENGLAND? THAT IS UNFORTUNATE.



YES, BUT MY DEVOTION TO OUR FATHERLAND HAS NEVER BEEN QUESTIONED. I HAVE SERVED WITH—



THE EMBITTERED OFFICER WAS GRANTED FOURTEEN DAYS LEAVE. IN THE SMOKY ATMOSPHERE OF A BAR, OFF THE UNTER DEN LINDEN, HE SAT ALONE. QUIETLY DRINKING TO OBLITERATE THE MEMORY OF COMRADES WHO NOW LAY FROZEN, WHERE DEATH HAD CLAIMED THEM.



Chapter 2. *Deception*

THE TIDE OF BATTLE WAS TURNING. THE GERMAN FORTRESS OF EUROPE WAS BESIEGED. IN SEPTEMBER, 1943, CANADIAN TROOPS CROSSED THE MESSINA STRAITS TO HACK A FOOTHOLD ON THE TOE OF ITALY.

TEUFEL!
DRIVE THE DOGS
BACK INTO THE
SEA.

LONG BITTER MONTHS OF FIGHTING FOLLOWED. WITH THE COMING OF THE AUTUMN RAINS, THE CAMPAIGN BOGGED DOWN, AS THE VETERANS OF THE EIGHTH ARMY, CANADIANS AND ANZACS, CLAWED THEIR WAY UP THE SPINE OF ITALY.

WHAT'S
UP? YOU
HAD
ENOUGH?

NO, MATE. WE'VE
DONE ALL THE HARD
WORK, SO YOU BLOKES
CAN GO MARCHING
STRAIGHT INTO
ROME.

The Iron Cross

THE GERMAN POSITION BECAME DESPERATE. EVERY UNIT WAS PRESSED INTO SERVICE TO FIGHT ALONG THE CONFUSED AND CRUMBLING FRONT. ONE OF THOSE UNITS WAS THE THIRD BULGARIAN BRIGADE.



THE RAGGED, ILL-ASSORTED LINES OF MEN WERE A FAR CRY FROM THE JACKBOOTED STORM TROOPS VON BRAUN HAD ONCE COMMANDED. WHEN HE ADDRESSED THEM, HE MADE LITTLE EFFORT TO CONCEAL HIS DISGUST.



TWO HOURS LATER, THEY WERE IN ACTION. THE OLD FAMILIAR STENCH OF BURNT CORDITE FILLED THE AIR.



THEY PITCHED HEADLONG INTO THE SAVAGE MAW OF CLOSE-QUARTER BATTLE. THROUGH THE SWIRLING SMOKE, FLAME FLICKERED FROM SMALL ARMS...



BUT THE BULGARIANS HAD NO STOMACH FOR THE MURDEROUS RECEPTION OF THE BRITISH GUNS. THEY WAVERED, BROKE AND RAN.

RUN, YOU RABBITS! KEEP RUNNING, THAT'S ALL YOU'RE FIT FOR... AM I NEVER TO LEAD REAL MEN AGAIN?



VON BRAUN FACED THE UTTER AND FINAL DEGRADATION OF AN OFFICER, DESERTED BY HIS OWN MEN IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY. METHODICALLY HE COCKED HIS HEAVY MAUSER. ONE BULLET WAS ALL HE NEEDED. THE BLACK ABYSS OF DESPAIR YAWNED INVITINGLY, BUT TO A MAN OF HIS CHARACTER THAT WAS NOT THE ANSWER.

NEIN, NEIN! THIS IS NOT THE WAY TO END IT!



CARING LITTLE FOR HIS OWN FATE, BRAUN HARDLY TROUBLED TO CONCEAL HIMSELF FROM THE STORM OF KHAJI-CLAD FIGURES THAT SWEEPED FORWARD. BUT WITH THE BIZARRE CHANCE OF WAR, NONE SAW THE LONE GREY FIGURE CROUCHED AMONGST THE ROCKS.

COME ON, LADS, WE'VE GOT 'EM ON THE RUN!



HIMMEL, THEY ARE BRAVE MEN!

BUT THE BRITISH TRIUMPH WAS SHORT-LIVED. CONCEALED SPANDAUS CAUGHT THEM IN A MURDEROUS ENFILADE FIRE.



WITH THE CUNNING OF A MOUNTAIN WOLF, THE GERMAN COMMANDER HAD USED THE BULGARIAN BRIGADE TO LURE THE BRITISH INTO THE OPEN.



THE FIRST WAVE OF INFANTRY TOOK THE FULL PUNISHMENT AND ONLY THREE SURVIVORS PLUNGED INTO A HOLLOW AFTER THE BURLY SERGEANT CAMERON.

SPREAD OUT,
LADS, AND KEEP
DOWN! HOLD YOUR
FIRE! THEY MAY
TRY TO RUSH US!

QUICK,
STUMPY, GIVE
US A LEG UP
WITH THE
BREN.

UNDER THE SAVAGE MAULING, THE
BRITISH ATTACK HAD WITHERED.
AS THE MAIN FORCE PULLED BACK,
A YOUNG LIEUTENANT WAS HIT
CLOSE BY WHERE VAN BRAUN WAS
HIDING.

AGH!

BULLETS WHINED VICIOUSLY AROUND,
BUT DEATH HELD NO FEAR FOR THE
GERMAN. WITHOUT A SECOND THOUGHT,
HE DRAGGED THE WOUNDED BRITISH
OFFICER TO COVER...

ONLY
ANOTHER
FEW YARDS...
HANG ON, WE'LL
MAKE IT!

NO
USE—I'VE
BOUGHT
IT...

VON BRAUN'S EFFORTS HAD BEEN IN VAIN. THE LIFE BLOOD WAS SWIFTLY DRAINING FROM THE YOUNG BRITISH LIEUTENANT. HE BENT CLOSE TO CATCH THE LAST MUTTERED WORDS.

SOME OF MY LADS - STILL OUT THERE. THEY NEED ME - I - I MUST GET THEM BACK...

THE VOICE TRAILED AWAY, AND VON BRAUN GAZED INTO A DEAD MAN'S FACE, A STRANGE IDEA FORMING IN HIS MIND.

THE TRANSFORMATION TOOK ONLY A FEW MINUTES. THEN A DEAD BRITISH OFFICER ROSE UP TO FIGHT AGAIN.

SLEEP IN PEACE, HERR LEUTNANT. YOUR MEN SHALL HAVE A LEADER. I'LL GET THEM BACK.

AN IRON CROSS HASTILY STUFFED INTO A BATTLE-DRESS POCKET, WAS ALL THAT REMAINED OF HAUPTMANN VON BRAUN.

SERGEANT CAMERON GRITTED HIS TEETH AGAINST THE SEARING PAIN FROM THE WOUND IN HIS SHOULDER. SOMEHOW, HE MANAGED TO GRATE OUT WORDS OF CONFIDENCE HE DID NOT FEEL.

HERE, SARGE,
I'LL FIX YOUR
ARM.

LISTEN, YOU BLOKES! WITH
A BIT O'LUCK WE MIGHT HOLD
OUT 'TIL DARK. THEN WE'LL
PULL BACK. IF NOT - WE'LL
TAKE A FEW JERRIES
WITH US, 'FORE WE
GET NAILED.

HEY, SARGE,
HERE COMES AN
OFFICER!

THEY WATCHED IN FASCINATION, AS A LONE KHAKI FIGURE ZIG-ZAGGED CRAZILY TOWARD THEM THROUGH A GAUNTLET OF FIRE.

I'LL LAY YER
TEN TO ONE HE
DON'T MAKE
IT!

BELT UP, THE
LOT OF YOU! GIVE
HIM COVERING FIRE.
COME ON, MOVE -
RAPID FIRE!

THE LANCE CORPORAL LOST HIS LACONIC BET. THE OFFICER WAS AN ELUSIVE TARGET WITH ASTONISHING SPEED HE COVERED THE LAST HUNDRED YARDS AND MADE AN UNCEREMONIOUS ENTRY AMONGST THE LITTLE POCKET OF MEN.



LUMME!
YOU CUT IT A
BIT FINE, SIR.

CEASE FIRE!
SHOVE THAT DRESSING ON
AND STOP FUSSING LIKE
AN OLD HEN, STUMPY.

GLADLY, THE TOUGH SERGEANT HANDED OVER THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SITUATION TO THE HARD-FACED OFFICER.



CAN'T SAY I'M SORRY
TO SEE YOU HERE, SIR, THIS
AIN'T WHAT YOU MIGHT
CALL A HEALTH
RESORT.

I SAW YOU LADS GET PINNED
DOWN. GUESSED YOU MIGHT NEED
A SPOT OF HELP. NOW, LISTEN,
IF WE ALL PULL TOGETHER
WE STAND A FAIR CHANCE...

The Iron Cross

THEY LISTENED AND TOOK HEART. BUT A TINGE OF SUSPICION CREEPT INTO THE SERGEANT'S MIND.

YOU CAN STRAIGHT INTO A GERMAN AMBUSH. THE BRITISH—I MEAN, OUR LADS, VALL. PROBABLY BE PUSHED BACK ABOUT TWO MILES. WITH LUCK, THE GERMANS WILL BE TOO OCCUPIED TO WORRY ABOUT US.

YOU SEEM TO BE PRETTY WELL INFORMED! WHAT UNIT ARE YOU FROM, SIR?

IT WAS AN AWKWARD MOMENT...

I SHOULD HAVE INTRODUCED MYSELF, SERGEANT, LIEUTENANT BROWN, INTELLIGENCE CORPS, ATTACHED TO SEVENTH BRIGADE H.Q.

SORRY, SIR, BUT WE CAN'T BE TOO CAREFUL.

THE REPLY WAS SMOOTH AND UNHESITATING. IT SEEMED TO SATISFY THE SERGEANT.

THE LIEUTENANT HAD BEEN RIGHT. NO FRESH ATTACK CAME. IN THE GATHERING DUSK THEY WAITED QUIETLY.

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THAT GEEZER, JUST AIN'T RIGHT. CAN'T PUT ME FINGER ON IT, BUT...

STOW IT, SARGE! HE'S A MEAN LOOKING CUSS I GRANT YOU, BUT THEM WERE REAL JERRY BULLETS HE WAS DODGING...



AT LAST A WATERY MOON BROKE THROUGH THE OVERCAST SKY . . .

TIME TO GO. DUMP ALL
THE GEAR THAT MIGHT RATTLE.
FOLLOW OUT IN SINGLE FILE.
SERGEANT, YOU'LL STICK CLOSE TO
ME. CORPORAL, BRING UP THE REAR
WITH THE BREN. WE MOVE IN THREE
MINUTES — AND, REMEMBER,
NOT A SOUND!



THERE WAS AN AUTHORITY IN THE LIEUTENANT'S VOICE THAT BROOKED NO
ARGUMENT. THE TOUGH BAND OF VETERANS FOLLOWED HIM UNQUESTIONINGLY
INTO THE NIGHT.



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The Iron Cross

FOR AN HOUR THEY STUMBLED THROUGH THE DARKNESS, THE LIEUTENANT MOVED WITH AN UNERRING CERTAINTY, THAT WAS NOT SHARED BY THE SERGEANT. THEY WERE HEADING DUE WEST...

I DON'T GET IT, SIR! WHY DIDN'T WE STRIKE DUE SOUTH?

HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN? WE ARE STILL THE WRONG SIDE OF THE GUSTAV LINE. THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY THROUGH. TWO HUNDRED YARDS BELOW US IS A MINEFIELD. IT IS THE ONLY WEAK LINK. COME—FOLLOW ME.



CAUTIOUSLY THEY WORMED THEIR WAY FORWARD. THEN THE HEAVY TREAD OF JACKBOOTS SOUNDED CLOSE BY AND A SQUARE-HEADED FIGURE SHOWED CLEARLY ON THE SKYLINE.

THAT'S TORN IT!

HERE, SERGEANT, HOLD MY GUN. KEEP THE MEN BACK UNTIL I SIGNAL.



BEFORE THE STARTLED SERGEANT COULD REPLY, THE LIEUTENANT HAD MELTED INTO THE DARKNESS.

IT WAS AN OLD TRICK, BUT IN THE FRONT LINE WHERE MEN'S NERVES ARE TAUT, IT WORKED. A SMALL STONE WHISTLED THROUGH THE AIR. THE GERMAN SPUN ROUND...

ACHTUNG! WHO GOES THERE?





A HAMMER LOCK SNAPPED
ROUND THE GERMAN'S NECK.
THERE WAS A STIFLED GRUNT
AND HE SLID UNCONSCIOUS TO
THE GROUND.

A SOFT WHISTLE CALLED THE MEN FORWARD. EVEN THE STONY-FACED SERGEANT
GRUNTED APPROVAL.



THAT'S THE
NEATEST BIT OF
UNARMED COMBAT
I'VE SEEN. COME
ON, LADS.

'E CAN
USE HIS MITTS
RIGHT HANDY,
CAN THAT ONE!



LANCE CORPORAL ACKERMAN HAD LEARNED TO FIGHT THE HARD WAY.

THE ONLY GOOD GERMANS ARE DEAD 'UNS. I'LL FINISH THIS LITTLE JOB FOR YOU, SIR!

NO! LEAVE HIM! HE WILL NOT TROUBLE US! A SHOT WOULD BE HEARD...

THEN I'LL USE THE BUTT ON 'IM -



THE LIEUTENANT GRABBED ACKERMAN BY THE FRONT OF HIS BATTLE DRESS BLOUSE . . .

'ERE,
WHAT THE
BLAZES...!

KILL IN BATTLE—
BUT THIS WOULD BE
MURDER! NOW GET
BACK INTO THE RANKS,
YOU SCUM!

TOUGH THOUGH HE WAS, THE LANCE CORPORAL FLINCHED FROM THE STARE OF GREY EYES FROM WHICH THE CHILL OF SIBERIA HAD NEVER THAWED.

THE MEN FELL BACK IN AWED SILENCE. ONLY SERGEANT CAMERON FOUND THE AUDACITY TO QUESTION THEIR OFFICER'S DECISION.

WIRE'S
CUT,
SIR!

I AGREE WITH
ACK, SIR! WE OUGHT
TO KILL HIM. THERE
AIN'T NO GOOD
GERMANS!

THAT COULD BE A MATTER OF
OPINION, SERGEANT. MEANWHILE
WE HAVE A HUNDRED YARDS OF
MINEFIELD TO CROSS. DO YOU
WANT TO LEAD?

WITHOUT WAITING FOR AN
ANSWER, THE LIEUTENANT
TURNED AND LED THE WAY
THROUGH THE GAP.

WITH INFINITE CARE HE EDGED FORWARD, ACROSS THE LAND SEWN WITH DEADLY SEEDS OF VIOLENCE. A GRIM GAME OF HUNT THE SLIPPER, WITH DEATH AS THE PRIZE.

EACH MAN IS TO FOLLOW EXACTLY IN MY TRACKS. KEEP TEN FEET BEHIND ME. THAT WAY IF I FAIL, YOU CAN TAKE OVER - LET'S GO!



WHAT A CARD! GETS ALL WORKED UP OVER A JERRY, THEN COMES HOPPING THROUGH THIS VALLEY O' DEATH AND DON'T TURN HAIR!

HE SORTED OLD ACK OUT A BIT SHARPISH. HE FAIR GIVES ME THE CREEPS.



IT TOOK THIRTY TENSION-PACKED MINUTES TO COVER THAT LETHAL HUNDRED YARDS. AT LAST THEY STOOD SHIVERING IN SWEAT-DRENCHED SHIRTS. THEY HAD MADE IT.



THAT'S IT, JUST ANOTHER FOOT AND YOU'RE CLEAR!

THEN, A SEARCHLIGHT BEAM STABBED THE NIGHT AND A GUTTURAL VOICE RANG OUT.

GIVE ME THE BREN!
SERGEANT, GET THE MEN
TO COVER! I'LL JOIN YOU
IN A MINUTE.

ACHTUNG!
HALTEN!

JERKED INTO MOTION BY THE LIEUTENANT'S SHARP ORDER THEY RACED FOR COVER. BEHIND THEM THE STACCATO RATTLE OF THE BREN OPENED UP.

AT THE DOUBLE,
LADS! IF WE'RE
CAUGHT IN THE
OPEN, WE'VE
HAD IT!





IT WAS A PERILOUS GAME THAT THE LIEUTENANT PLAYED, WHEN THE DAZZLING BEAM CAUGHT HIM, HE WAS READY...



A SHORT BURST OF THREE ROUNDS, STRAIGHT DOWN THE BEAM - AND THE LIGHT CUT DEAD.

IN THE SUDDEN INKY BLACKNESS, A SPANDAU GROPED BLINDLY FOR ITS TARGET.

ACH! THE SWINE HAS HIT THE LIGHT!



BREATHLESS, BUT OTHERWISE UNRUFFLED, THE LIEUTENANT REMAINED AS HARD AND UNEMOTIONAL AS EVER.

THAT FIXED THEIR
LITTLE GAME. FROM
NOW ON IT SHOULD BE A
STRAIGHT BASH BACK
TO THE LINES.

I DON'T KNOW
WHAT YOUR GAME
IS, LIEUTENANT, BUT
YOU SURE KNOW HOW TO
TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.
I'M GOING TO WATCH
YOU LIKE A PERISHIN'
HAWK!

IT WAS 03.00 HOURS WHEN THEY REACHED THE FORWARD BRITISH POSITIONS.

HALT,
WHO GOES
THERE?

HOLD YOUR FIRE,
WE'RE BRITISH. CUT
OFF IN THE LAST PUSH.
WE'VE JUST COME
THROUGH THE
JERRY LINES.

COME IN NICE AND
SLOW. WE'RE MIGHTY
ITCHY ON THE TRIGGER
FINGER ROUND HERE,
MATE...



THE UNIT WAS A CANADIAN BATTALION. IN THE STILLNESS THAT PRECEDES THE DAWN THEY WERE TAKEN BEFORE A GAUNT-FACED COMMANDING OFFICER.



SO LIEUTENANT BROWN FOUND HIMSELF ONCE AGAIN COMMANDING A FIGHTING UNIT.

THAT'S SWELL ! I CAN USE THIS BUNCH O' ROUGHNECKS YOU'VE COLLECTED, LIEUTENANT. YOU'RE ASSIGNED TO THREE PLATOON, BAKER COMPANY. THEY TOOK A HAMMERING YESTERDAY AND THEY'RE PRETTY THIN IN THE RANKS .



AS THE RAGGED LINE FILED OUT INTO THE DARKNESS, SERGEANT CAMERON STOOD HIS GROUND .

PERMISSION TO SPEAK, SIR !

WHAT THE DEVIL IS IT NOW, SERGEANT ? I'VE GOT ONE HECK OF A LOT TO DO — OUT WITH IT, MAN !



ONLY HIS STRONG SENSE OF DUTY FORCED THE SERGEANT TO BLURT OUT THE SUSPICIONS HE FELT OF THE LIEUTENANT. AWKWARDLY HE GROPED FOR WORDS...

THAT'S THE WAY IT WENT, SIR. I KNOW IT SOUNDS CRAZY, BUT I'VE GOT A HUNCH THAT LIEUTENANT BROWN IS SOME KIND OF PHONEY. I THOUGHT—I THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW, SIR.



THE COLONEL'S FACE DARKENED...

D' YOU WANT ME TO ARREST AN OFFICER FOR SOME QUEER KINK YOU'VE GOT AGAINST HIM? NO DICE, SERGEANT—GET YOUR FACTS STRAIGHT BEFORE YOU BRING A SERIOUS CHARGE AGAINST AN OFFICER. NOW REJOIN YOUR PLATOON!

VERY GOOD, SIR.



I GUESS IT DID SOUND PRETTY THIN, BUT I KNOW I'M RIGHT! SEEMS WE'RE GOING TO HEAD BACK INTO THE THICK OF IT—SO MAYBE I'LL HAVE A CHANCE TO GET MY FACTS STRAIGHT!



Chapter 3. *Death Takes a Hand*

MEANWHILE, LIEUTENANT BROWN HAD ASSUMED COMMAND OF WHAT WAS LEFT OF THREE PLATOON, 'B' COMPANY, HIS OWN LITTLE BAND OF MEN SWELLING THE RANKS OF THE CANADIANS.

GLAD TO HAVE YOU ALONG WITH US — MY NAME'S CRAIG. WE MOVE OFF IN FIVE MINUTES. WE'VE GOT A GOOD BUNCH O' LADS — HATE JERRY LIKE POISON!

PLEASSED TO MEET YOU, SIR. THEY LOOK TOUGH ENOUGH.



THE LONG, SAVAGE BATTLE FOR CASSINO WAS REACHING ITS CLIMAX.

OUR TASK IS TO ESTABLISH A BRIDGEHEAD ACROSS THE RAPIDO RIVER, SOUTH WEST OF CASSINO, AND HOLD IT 'TIL THE ARMOUR CAN CROSS. I'LL LEAD OVER WITH ONE AND TWO PLATOONS. BROWN, YOUR PLATOON WILL BE IN RESERVE...





HE'D BETTER NOT COME ANY MORE O' THAT GERMAN LOVING LARK. HE MIGHT MEET WITH AN ACCIDENT—ME AND STUMPY 'ERE DON'T RECKON MUCH TO IT.

STOW THAT KIND O' TALK, ACKERMAN! HE'S AN OFFICER, WHATEVER ELSE HE MIGHT BE. ALL THE SAME, WE'LL KEEP OUR EYES ON MISTER BROWN.



THE OBJECT OF THEIR CONCERN WAS IN THE JEEP LEADING THE PLATOON. IN AN IMPETUOUS MOMENT HE HAD GONE TO THE AID OF A HANDFUL OF BRAVE MEN. HE HAD NOT THOUGHT THAT FATE WOULD CONSPIRE TO MAKE HIM BEAR ARMS AGAINST HIS OWN COUNTRYMEN.



FOR ONE MOMENT HE HAD BEEN OFFGUARD. THE CANADIAN DID NOT SPEAK AGAIN, AND THE LIEUTENANT HOPED THE SLIP HAD PASSED UNNOTICED.

AS THE INFANTRY LUMBERED INTO POSITION ALONG THE START LINE, THE BOMBARDMENT OF THE ONCE PEACEFUL MONASTERY TOWN WAS STEPPED UP.



THE CONVOY HAD GROUND TO A HALT NEAR THE FORWARD AREA, THERE WAS NO TIME FOR FURTHER SPECULATION. ORDERS RANG OUT AND 'B' COMPANY SURGED FORWARD WITH THEIR ASSAULT CRAFT.




The Iron Cross

A HEAVY CREEPING BARRAGE FROM TWENTY-FIVE POUNDERS COVERED THE RIVER CROSSING.



BUT THE GERMANS WERE THERE. FROM DEEP DUG EMBLACEMENTS, THEY HIT OUT HARD AS THE CANADIANS CAME WITHIN RANGE OF SMALL ARMS FIRE.






LIEUTENANT BROWN, MOVE
YOUR MEN OUT TO THE RIGHT FLANK.
GIVE US COVERING FIRE AS WE STORM
THE FIRST RIDGE. CLOSE UP ONCE
WE'RE ON THE OBJECTIVE.

IT WAS A TENSE MOMENT FOR THE GERMAN
OFFICER. AROUND HIM, MEN WAITED
PATIENTLY FOR THE FINAL COMMAND THAT
WOULD SEND THEM INTO THE FACE OF
DEATH. HE FOUND A STRANGE KINSHIP
WITH THEM FOR THEY SHARED A COMMON
BOND OF COURAGE.

NUMBER THREE PLATOON DRAGGED ITSELF UP THE MUDDY SLOPES
TO COVER THE ADVANCE.



PICK YOUR
TARGETS, MEN.
GO FOR THE
SPANDAU NESTS.
RAPID FIRE!

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FROM THE RIGHT FLANK THE L.M.G.'S OPENED UP WITH THEIR HARSH CHORUS. MAJOR CRAIG WAVED HIS ARM AND TAUT-FACED MEN SCRAMBLED UP THE BANK.

FORWARD,
MEN — KEEP
GOING!

AAGH!



IT WAS TWO HUNDRED YARDS TO THEIR OBJECTIVE AND NEARLY HALF OF 'B' COMPANY PAID THE FULL PRICE TO GAIN IT.

ONE LAST
EFFORT, MEN —
CHARGE!



THE HANDFUL THAT GOT THROUGH, FOUGHT WITH A SAVAGE FEROCITY THAT NOTHING COULD CHECK. WITHIN MINUTES, DEAD COMRADES WERE AVENGED. NO PRISONERS WERE TAKEN.



GO TO GROUND, MEN!
JERRY WILL HIT BACK QUICK.
SERGEANT-MAJOR, SIGNAL
THREE PLATOON TO
MOVE UP.

SERGEANT CAMERON HAD WATCHED THE LIEUTENANT'S FACE CLOSELY DURING THE ASSAULT, BUT THE HARSH LINES SHOWED NO TRACE OF EMOTION.

POOR DEVILS!
THEY GOT CUT
TO RIBBONS.

SAVE
YOUR SYMPATHY,
SERGEANT. IT WILL BE
OUR TURN NEXT.
THERE'S THE SIGNAL!
PREPARE TO ADVANCE
— ADVANCE!



THE FIRST GERMAN MORTAR BOMB SMASHED DOWN, AS THE PLATOON JOINED UP WITH THE REMNANTS OF THEIR COMPANY.

HIT THE
DIRT! INTO THE
FOXHOLES, THEY'VE
GOT US RANGED
WITH MORTARS.



THEY COULD ONLY COWER IN SHELL SCRAPES AND SHALLOW FOXHOLES AS THE GERMAN MORTARS PLASTERED THE POSITION WITH A DEVASTATING ACCURACY.

WE'RE IN TROUBLE! WE'RE DEAD DUCKS WHICHEVER WAY IT GOES NOW.

IT WAS ONLY TO BE EXPECTED. THE GERMANS ALWAYS HAVE THEIR FORWARD POSITIONS COVERED WITH MORTARS ON FIXED BEARINGS.

SEEMS TO ME YOU KNOW A MIGHTY LOT ABOUT THESE JERRIES — SIR!

A THIN SMILE SPREAD ACROSS THE OFFICER'S FACE . . .

PERHAPS I DO, SERGEANT. BUT IT MIGHT BE USEFUL. WITH THE MAJOR'S PERMISSION, I THINK I CAN SILENCE THOSE MORTARS. GET SIX MEN, SERGEANT, AND FOLLOW ME!

FACED ONCE AGAIN WITH A DESPERATE SITUATION, THE LIEUTENANT'S VOICE HELD A HARD RING OF AUTHORITY. DESPITE HIS DOUBTS THE SERGEANT MOVED COMPULSIVELY TO OBEY.

WHAT THE DEUCE? I'M COMMANDING THIS COMPANY! COME BACK.

BUT THE STARTLED MAJOR ADDRESSED THE EMPTY AIR, THE LIEUTENANT HAD NOT WAITED FOR PERMISSION.

FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, LIEUTENANT BROWN PAUSED, TO TAKE MEASURE OF THE MEN SERGEANT CAMERON HAD PICKED.

LET'S
GET AT
'EM!

YOU'VE CHOSEN WELL, SERGEANT!
LISTEN CAREFULLY. THE MORTARS
WILL BE PROTECTED BY A SPANDAU
NEST. WE SILENCE THAT
FIRST . . .



TAKE TWO MEN,
SERGEANT, AND KICK
UP A NOISE JUST UP AHEAD
THERE. KEEP THEM OCCUPIED
AS MUCH AS YOU CAN.
THERE'S AN INLET ABOUT
TWO HUNDRED YARDS UP
RIVER WHICH SHOULD
BRING US OUT ON
THEIR FLANK.



The Iron Cross

DESPITE HIS MISGIVINGS, THE SERGEANT STILL FELT A GRUDGING RESPECT FOR THE COLD-BLOODED EFFICIENCY OF HIS COMMANDER.

LOB A COUPLE O' SMOKE BOMBS OVER. THAT'LL KEEP 'EM GUESSING. BY THUNDER, THAT LIEUTENANT DON'T MISS A TRICK.

FUNNY COVE! COMING UP IN THE JEEP, HE SAID SOMETHING I COULDN'T CATCH - BUT I'D SWEAR IT WAS GERMAN!



IT JUST DON'T ADD UP, BUT I'VE GOT A HUNCH WE'RE GOING TO FIND OUT JUST WHAT HIS GAME REALLY IS - AND PRETTY SOON. KEEP FIRING!



THE SERGEANT MADE A GOOD JOB OF CREATING A DIVERSION AND THE LIEUTENANT AND HIS MEN STALKED UNSEEN THROUGH THE SMOKE-COVERED RUSHES OF THE INLET.

WE'RE ALMOST THERE, MEN. WHEN I GIVE THE SIGNAL, GET IN AND PIN THOSE SPANDAUS BEFORE THEY CAN TRAVERSE ROUND. *READY!*



NEXT MOMENT . . .

DON'T LET UP. THEY WILL TRY TO COME THROUGH THE SMOKE.

SEIGFREID, BEHIND YOU! SWITCH THE FIRE . . . AAAAGH!



The Iron Cross

THE GAUNT-FACED LIEUTENANT NEVER PAUSED TO SEE THE SWIFT EXECUTION OF THE GERMAN GUNNERS BUT RACED ON TOWARDS THE MORTAR CREWS.



ONE GERMAN BULLET FOUND ITS MARK, AND FOR LITTLE STUMPY LEWIS, THE LONG BITTER STRUGGLE WAS OVER.

REST EASY, STUMPY—I'LL MAKE THEM SWINES PAY FOR THIS!

CORPORAL, COME ON! THE LIEUTENANT HAS GONE AHEAD.



THE MORTAR CREWS FROZE AT THE SUDDEN HARSH COMMAND...

ACHTUNG! SURRENDER! THE FIRST MAN THAT MOVES—DIES! UP WITH YOUR HANDS, SCHNELL!





BUT THE HARD-FACED ACKERMAN HAD OTHER IDEAS. BEHIND HIM, STUMPY LAY STRETCHED ON THE ITALIAN SOIL AND WITH A SNARL, HE SWUNG UP HIS TOMMY GUN...



The Iron Cross

THE BUTT OF A PISTOL CRASHED AGAINST THE SIDE OF ACKERMAN'S HEAD AND HIS LETHAL BURST RIPPED HARMLESSLY SKYWARD.

I'LL NOT BE SO LENIENT WITH THE NEXT MAN WHO DISOBEYS MY ORDERS!

UUUGH!



FOR SERGEANT CAMERON, IT WAS THE LAST STRAW...

WHY, YOU ROTTEN — UUGH! IF IT WASN'T FOR THIS WOUND, I'D TEAR YOU APART. DO YOU THINK THESE NAZIS WOULD HAVE SHOWN US ANY MERCY! WHO THE DEVIL ARE YOU, ANYWAY?



TAUT NERVES HAD LEFT THE MEN IN AN UGLY MOOD AND THEY MOVED FORWARD THREATENINGLY TO BACK UP THE SERGEANT. BUT THE LONE FIGURE THAT FACED THEM, HELD A CONVINCING ARGUMENT IN HIS HANDS . . .



AS ABRUPTLY AS IT HAD STARTED, THE MORTAR FIRE CEASED. MAJOR CRAIG BREATHED A SILENT PRAYER OF THANKS, AND WEARILY GASPED OUT A MESSAGE TO BATTALION HEADQUARTERS .

THEY'VE DONE IT, MAJOR! THAT LIMEY OFFICER, HE'S CLOBBERS THE MORTARS .

HEAVEN KNOWS HOW HE MANAGED IT — HELLO ABLE FOX ONE — BRIDGEHEAD SECURE. CONTINUE THE ADVANCE. ABLE FOX ONE OVER . . .



SOON, THE REMAINING CANADIAN COMPANIES HAD CROSSED THE RIVER. WHEN THE SUCCESS SIGNAL STUTTERED THROUGH THE AIR, THE COLONEL ORDERED A GENERAL ADVANCE.

ENEMY RESISTANCE CEASED ON 'B' COMPANY SECTOR, SIR. THEY'RE PUSHING ON.

THAT'S IT, THEN. CHARLIE AND DON COMPANIES MOVE UP. I WANT THAT BRIDGEHEAD OPENED FOR THE ARMOUR TO GET THROUGH.



BEHIND THEM, SAPPERS HAD ALREADY SLUNG A HEAVY PONTOON BRIDGE ACROSS THE RIVER. THE FIRST OF THE UNGAINLY ARMoured MONSTERS RUMBLED FORWARD...

LEFT, LEFT STICK A BIT - STEADY.



THE GERMAN DEFENCE LINE WAS HELD IN DEPTH AND THE INFANTRY HIT INCREASING RESISTANCE. BUT THE VITAL BRIDGEHEAD WAS SECURE AND THE ARMoured BUILD-UP CONTINUED.

HELLO, DOG FOX. PINNED DOWN BY ENEMY PILLBOXES. SUPPORT REQUIRED URGENTLY, OVER.

HELLO, DOG FOX THREE. ARMoured SUPPORT NOW MOVING UP. HOLD ON. OVER AND OUT.



THE COLONEL MOVED UP TO WHERE 'B' COMPANY STILL CLUNG TENACIOUSLY TO THEIR HARD-WON RIDGE.

NICE GOING, MAJOR. YOU HAD ME WORRIED WHEN THOSE MORTARS PINNED YOU DOWN, BUT YOU'VE DONE A GREAT JOB. THEY CAN'T STOP US NOW. PULL YOUR MEN BACK TO RESERVE.

THERE'S NOT MANY OF US LEFT, BUT IT'S THANKS TO LIEUTENANT BROWN THERE'S ANY AT ALL. HE TOOK A HANDFUL OF MEN AND SOMEHOW HE SILENCED THOSE MORTARS. HE'S NOT COME BACK YET...



A LOOK OF CONCERN CROSSED THE COLONEL'S FACE. THERE HAD BEEN SOMETHING PUZZLING ABOUT THE GAUNT FACE OF THE LIEUTENANT BROWN THAT STILL HAUNTED HIS MEMORY.

LET'S FIND HIM. I WONDERED HOW HE'D SHAPE UP UNDER FIRE. WE DON'T REALLY KNOW TOO MUCH ABOUT HIM, DO WE?

NO, SIR! JUST THAT HE'S A PRETTY TOUGH NUT. FROM THE LITTLE I SAW OF HIM, I'D SAY HE'S KNOWN SOME ROUGH PASSAGES IN THIS WAR.



THEY DID NOT HAVE FAR TO LOOK. COMING TOWARDS THEM WAS A STRAGGLING LINE OF MEN.



THE WARMTH OF THE COLONEL'S GREETING DID NOT TOUCH THE GRIM-FACED LIEUTENANT. HE WAS A MAN GROWN TIRED OF THE BITTER CHARADE FATE HAD FORCED HIM TO PLAY.

WELL DONE, MY BOY, WELL DONE! BY THUNDER, YOU'VE EARNED A DECORATION FOR YOUR ACTION TODAY—AND I'LL SEE YOU GET IT.

FIRST CLASS SHOW, BROWN! HOW DID YOU MANAGE IT?



THEN SERGEANT CAMERON'S VOICE LASHED OUT LIKE A WHIP.

YES, TELL 'EM HOW YOU DID IT—OR SHALL I? IT'S BECAUSE HE'S A ROTTEN HUN HIMSELF. HE'S GERMAN, DO YOU HEAR ME—A GERMAN!





AT THAT DRAMATIC MOMENT, EVEN THE GUARDS' ATTENTION WAS DIVERTED FROM THE PRISONERS. IT WAS A CHANCE THAT ONE FANATICAL NAZI HAD BEEN AWAITING . . .



AT SUCH CLOSE RANGE THE GERMAN COULD NOT MISS. ITS SEVEN SECOND FUSE IGNITED, THE GRENADE LANDED AT THE COLONEL'S FEET.



SOME MEN HIT THE DECK, OTHERS STOOD PARALYSED FOR THE SEEMING ETERNITY OF THOSE FEW SECONDS. FOR JUST ONE MAN, IT MEANT RELEASE . . .



MUFFLED THOUGH IT WAS BY THE HUMAN SHIELD, THE EXPLOSION WAS VIOLENT.



AS THE SMOKE CLEARED, THE COLONEL STAGGERED OVER TO THE SHATTERED BODY OF THE LIEUTENANT, WHERE LIFE STILL CLUNG FLEETLY . . .



HE CAUGHT THE LAST FAINT WHISPER . . .

JUST — JUST A SOLDIER WHO TRIED TO DO — HIS DUTY. DON'T BLAME — THE SERGEANT — AUF WIEDERSEHEN, COLONEL — AUF WIEDERSEHEN . . .



AS DEATH CLAIMED HIM, THE LIEUTENANT'S FACE LOST SOME OF THE HARD LINES. THE BITTER YEARS HAD ENGRAVED UPON IT. IN DEATH, HE FOUND THE PEACE THAT HAD SO LONG ELUDED HIM.

The Iron Cross

SLOWLY, THE COLONEL ROSE TO HIS FEET. BATTLE-HARDENED THOUGH HE WAS, THERE WAS A MIST BEFORE HIS EYES.

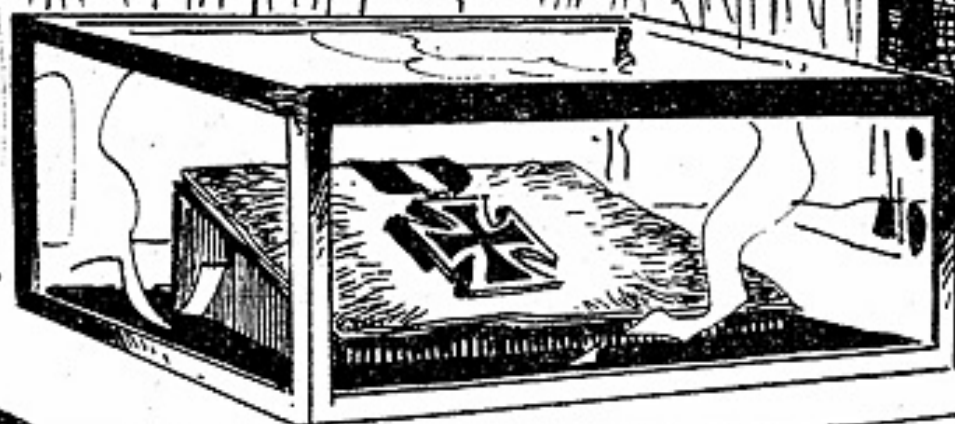
PERHAPS HE'D
ALREADY WON HIS
DECORATION, SIR.
SEE HERE, FROM
HIS POCKET, AN
IRON CROSS!

WE - WE
SHALL NEVER
KNOW NOW WHO
HE WAS - OR WHY
HE DID IT - BUT
HE SAVED OUR
LIVES.



AMONGST THE SOMBRE RELICS OF BATTLE GATHERED IN THE WAR MUSEUM OF THAT CANADIAN REGIMENT, THERE IS A SMALL GLASS-COVERED CASE. IT BEARS A SIMPLE LEGEND.

IN MEMORY OF AN UNKNOWN
OFFICER WHO DIED GALLANTLY
WITH THIS REGIMENT IN ITALY,
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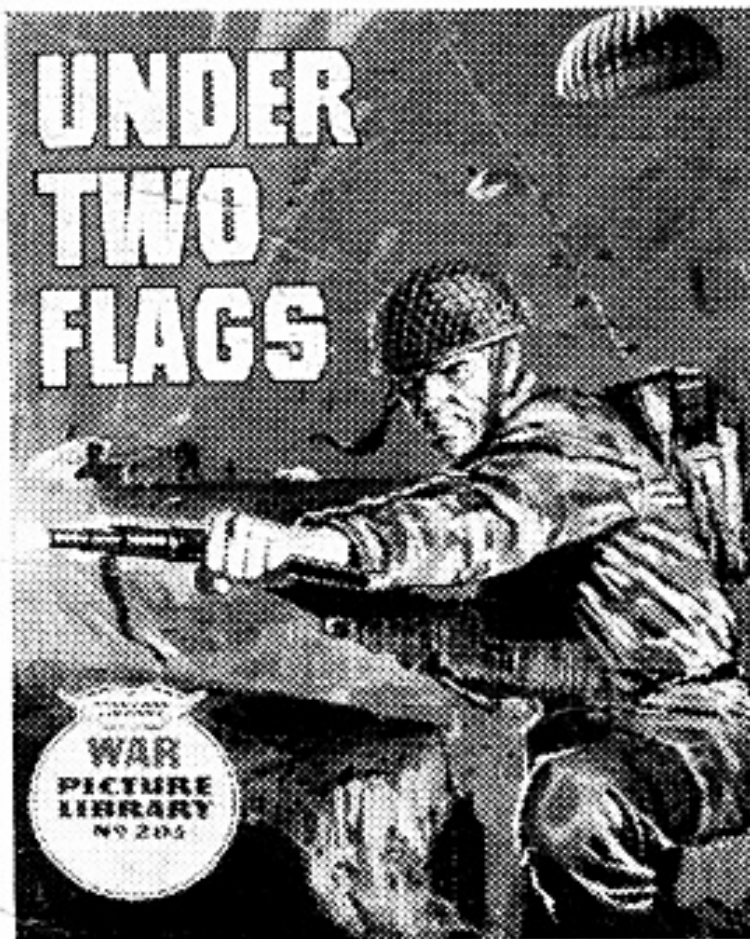
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